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ABSTRACT

Writing across the curriculum has become an educational reform movement that now questions the nature, purpose, and goals of educational institutions. Writing across the curriculum is based on premises such as the following: reading, writing, talking, and listening are the modes through which people think and learn; the more people write the better they learn; and teachers are the primary agents of instruction in the curriculum, and thus the primary agents of educational change. These premises are often introduced to interdisciplinary groups of teachers attending writing seminars and workshops. At such workshops, teachers explore the role of writing in the curriculum and in their subject area by reading works of composition researchers, by writing in journals or logs, by fulfilling multiple draft assignments, and by collaborating in peer writing groups. Programs developed along these lines have caused noticeable changes in the relationships between (1) teachers and students, by changing the classroom into a place in which both participate as partners in a learning dialogue; (2) teachers and colleagues, by bridging the chasm between composition and literature instruction; (3) teachers and institutions, by challenging the emphasis on research and compartmentalization within institutions; and (4) institutions and society, by empowering students with language awareness, critical thinking, and enlightenment. (HTH)

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THE POLITICS OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

[Paper delivered at the NCTE Comission on Composition
November 22, 1986]

INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that movements become political to the extent that they ask institutions or establishments to make choices that will result in some change in goals, operation, and resource allocation: who or what will have to change? what will be the short term effect? long term? how much will it cost? who will pay for it? will further change be necessary--or, if we wait long enough, will the whole idea just go away?

Writing across the curriculum has become an educational reform movement that now asks educational institutions these questions--questions about their nature, purpose, and goals.

I have been actively associated with developing writing across the curriculum programs since 1977--just about a decade now. From 1977 until 1983 I worked in such a program at Michigan Tech; since 1983 I have been in charge of a similar program at the University of Vermont. Along the way I have visited or helped develop writing-across-the-curriculum programs at differrent grade levels in 32 states. I seem to get more requests to do so each year, not fewer.

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I think the idea of writing across the curriculum has good staying power: it was around long before James Britton coined the phrase and my panel colleague Janet Emig articulated its substance in her 1977 article "Writing as a Mode of Learning." In fact, I believe the ideas will long outlive the term currently used to describe it.

PREMISES

Writing across the curriculum is based on premises that go the very center of what education is all about. Let me explain these premises briefly:

1. Language is at the center of the academic curriculum: reading, writing, talking, and listening are the modes through which people think and the modes by which people learn; it is through language--verbal, numerical, visual, musical-- that we learn science, art, social studies, and the humanities; in other words language <u>is</u> everybody's business.

2. The more people write the better they learn: Of all the modes of language use, writing is the most powerful for developing sustained critical thought. It is writing that makes our thought visible and helps us to modify, extend, develop, or critque that thought.

3. Teaching <u>with</u> writing promotes student-centered learning: quite simply, the more students write in every class, the more they express themselves and take an active role in their own education--and the less, by implication, they depend on the teacher to tell them what to think and know.

4. Teaching writing is teaching re-writing: the way to improve writing is to do it often, about things that matter, to audiences that care and respond. Teaching the stragegies of writing and rewriting is primarily the business of the writing class; when teachers in other subject areas know that, in making their own assignments they can build on it.

5. Teachers are the primary agents instruction in the curriculum: their beliefs, knowledge, methods, and attitudes determine to a large degree what schools do and stand for--and what their students stand for and do. As such they are, potentially at least, the primary agents of change at any level of education.

PROGRAMS

Thesee writing-across-the-curriculum premises are often introduced to interdisciplinary groups of teachers through multi-day writing workshops, seminars, or institututes. At such workshops teachers of history, chemistry, mathematics, physical education, and so on, explore the role of writing in the curriuclum, in general, and their subject area, in particular: they explore by talking with each other, by reading a short pieces by the likes of Britton, Emig, Elbow, Moffet, or Murray, and--especially--by doing a substantial amount of writing themselves.

[This idea--that to best understand how to assign and evaluate writing one must write oneself--is, of course, central to other teacher re-training programs such as the National Writing Project--from where I, at least, stole it.]

In other words, most of the teacher training at writing-across-the-curriculum projects with which I am familiar depend on hands-on experiential learning to convince teachers that writing is, in fact, central to teaching and learning in all subject areas. Among the common strategies to which teachers are introduced are these: (1) journals or logs, (2) multiple-draft assignments, and (3) peer writing groups.

Let me give you a concrete example of what I mean--because here is where the politics really begin: To introduce "journals" to classroom teachers, experientially, workshop leaders usually give out small notebooks at the first session and ask participants to write in them throughout the several days of the workshop, often using short 5-minute assignments to begin or end a particular workshop session: "What makes writing hard for you? What do you think makes it hard for your students? Write about one insight you had this morning? Etc. Following each journal write the participants share what they've written with each other--sometimes with the whole group, sometimes in break-out groups, sometimes with one neighbor. All the while the workshop leader is modeling how such writing might be used in an actual classroom: she writes herself and she always makes use of what's been written then and there to move her "class" forward. At the end of a day or two of doing such directed journal writing themselves, participants can make up their own minds about whether or not similar techniques would work with their own students.

In like manner, to promote multiple drafts and peer writing groups, participants start a piece of writing and read it to each other in small groups one day, then revise it according to the feedback they have received, share it again the next day, and so forth. If they find this experience useful themselves, they may introduce it to their students when they get back to their classrooms.

As you might guess, it is presumptious to describe what goes on in the name of "writing across the curriculum" at educational all institutions. Nor do most programs limit themselves to only these particular ideas--all the programs with which I am familiar also investigate: how to make good writing assignments, how to respond to and evaluate those assignments, how to freewrite, cluster, brainstorm, revise, and edit, how to write term papers, lab reports, position papers, and essay examinations, and so on. But I won't be out of line in suggesting that many serious programs grow out of workshop lessons such as I have just described.

POLITICS

I have explained what I consider to be the essence of writing across the curriculum to make sure you understand the foundations for my political judgments. Programs developed along the lines sketched out above cause educational change in several significant ways--teacher to student; teacher to teacher; teacher to institution; and institution to society.

1. TEACHER--STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS. Instructors who adopt the ideas promoted at writing-across-the-curriculum workshops change more than just their writing assignments: they change the nature of the classroom learning from passive to active, give individual students more responsiblilty and, in the process, more power. Consider, for example, the following:

--when instructors ask students to write to themselves in journals, they provide students with practice finding and articulating their own ideas, values, and voices;

--when instructors respond to, rather than grade, student writing, they demonstrate--sometimes for the first time--to students that not all writing--nor by extension all student ideas--needs be submitted for instructor approval, revision, or correction;

--when instructors give over class time to a discussion of ideas generated in non-graded journal writing, they are in fact altering the teacher--student relationship in important ways: student ideas command center stage along with instrutor ideas and both are seen as legitimate and vital parts of the academic community;

--and when instructors write themselves, in class, along with their students and share their impromptu writing--warts and all--with them, they are subjecting themselves to some of the same risks of self-disclosure and potential ridicule that students must regularly take; it is a leveling process giving instructors--as well as students--only as much authority as their current written ideas warrant.

Political implications? Take your pick and cite John Dewey, Paul Goodman, or Paulo Friere: the writing-across-the-curriculum classroom changes from a place in which teachers talk and students copy to one in which teachers and students together participate as partners in dialogue, as co-learners in asking questions and pursuing truth. And make no mistake about it, the writing does that--the writing gives the learner time to find, collect, organize, and rehearse ideas, allowing him a stronger and therefore more equal voice in his own learning. Students who develop voices in such an atmosphere

If writing so alters a classroom as I have described, there are other ramifications as well, rippling throughout the entire school curriculum. These I will but mention briefly, for reasons of time rather than importance:

2. TEACHER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS. I will simply give you the example I know best: within English Departments--especially at the college level--the dominant tradition is teaching literature, not composition. Most literature teachers put the literary work on center stage, talk about it celebrate it, explain it, and ask students to write one-draft essays about it. What these classes do not do is spend much class time on the student's own expression--as the the very assignments I described above (journals, multiple drafts, peer writing groups) are not part of the traditional literature classroom.

In other words, in spite of the quite dangerous assumptions of many literary artists--Blake, Whitman, and Ginsberg, for instance--the nature of traditional literature instrution is politically conservative: the high priests of interpretation lead

the parishoners to truth and light--the gospel according to New Critical Theory. Students learn on thing about non-conformity or appearance vs. reality in the content of the class while the form of the class teaches quite another lesson.

By extension across the curriculum, the degree to which teachers admit more student writing in their course of study, is the degree with which they begin to empathize with younger learners, champion their voices, and question the necssity of absolute and often arbitrary standards of performance and behavior.

3. TEACHER--INSTITUTION. First, let me speak here particularly to the college and university level, for here the politics get especially messy. The degree to which professors ask for more student writing across the curriculum may be the degree to which they bring in fewer research dollars or spend fewer hours pursuing their own esoteric research. Don't mistake me here: reserch and scholarship are essential functions of the modern university--at least where course loads make room for such professional activities. But writing-across-the-curriculum programs argue, first and foremost, for balance--argue that teachers should, indeed, spend more time on their teaching--at least more thoughtful time, sharing teacher voices and value with students and using writing to help accomplish that.

In the university at least, teachers who pay more attention to assigning and responding to student writing <u>are</u> spending more time on their teaching; however, the current reward stucture does not favor this: a condition leading to further debates about the

goals of higher education and the allotment of resources. The political implications of more writing in the curriculum? A challenge the publish or perish principle of tenure and promotion and to impersonal modes of student evaluation in favor of more exploratory classroom learning and individualized responses to student projects.

Another implication with political dimensions K through college would be this: the net result of admitting more writing into all subject areas is a tilt toward a curriculum which is at once: (1) more de-centralized and less authoritarian, (2) more interdisciplinary and less compartmentalized, (3) with more reliance on subjective expression and less on so-called "objective measures."

INSTITUTION--STATE. To conclude: there is of course a larger picture about which one can find politcal dimensionS:

In our society access to language often means access to power: writing-across-the-curriculum programs are essentially language awareness programs, asking all participants in the learning community to use language more fully and thoughtfully in all its modes than is presently the case. Writing is especially important here because it so clearly helps individuals shape and extend both their thoughts and voices. The degree which our students--minority and middle class alike--find their voices is the degree to which they influence and help direct our society. In fact, it is the degree to which we approach the Jeffersonian ideal of an elightened citizenry, making informed decisions and charting wisely our collective destiny.